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Writing to Heal Thyself: Physician as Person & Person as Physician

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Author:

[Kasman, Deborah L., Woodinville Primary Care](#)

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Abstract:

An experienced physician-teacher shares her own experiences with loss in medicine and loss in her personal life. Through personal writings during her divorce, she exemplifies the healing effect writing can have during difficult transformations that occur in life. She shares her bias that physicians need to accept and own their emotions and can use reflective writing as a tool toward developing greater professional skills. In the end, reflective writing skills offer physicians a means to become more emotionally aware and more available to patients' needs.

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I serendipitously encountered writing as an experiential journey in my medical career and now pause to reflect upon the question, “Why do I write?” As a physician grounded in the sciences, not as a literary person, I have awkwardly stumbled across writing as an outlet to ease distress, confusion, and pain. It has become a therapeutic arena of reflection, found by chance, yet subsequently transformed to a place for celebration and community with others who share the desire to process and understand their journey. As a medical educator, I offer my personal journey as encouragement for both educators and students of medicine to use the humanities, and specifically writing, to help them become whole physicians in their own personhood and in their ability to reach out to, and care for, patients.

After residency, I became aware that I had suffered a loss of self during the intense years of inpatient training. Three years into my busy practice, this admission of loss encouraged me to focus energy and time trying to recover voice. I took my first singing lessons, which introduced me to the importance of one’s core breath and the centrality of finding one’s unique voice. When my singing teacher offered a small class in free-style writing, utilizing Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones* [1] as its text, I eagerly enrolled. I learned strategies to let words flow from my heart to hand to pen. Finally, I took a seven week leave from medicine during my third year of practice, traveling freely in South America without an obligation to anyone but myself, giving space for unencumbered thoughts and feelings to reappear.

After singing, writing, and, finally, travel, I could reflect back on those moments of loss during residency. I was shocked at how stories poured from my pen, and I was unprepared for the catharsis and relief I felt. I shared one story with a close medical

friend, who encouraged me to publish it. The story was one that struck a chord with her own experiences, and, as it turned out, with those of many physicians in training. In this way, my reflections, "When a Heart Stops," concerning the death of an 11-year old boy, [2] became public. After rewriting this story multiple times, I no longer felt guilty for the death of the boy, who had already died before arriving to my care at an ER four years earlier! The experience of sharing this story with others, and the appreciation I received from other physicians (expressed to me through letters, phone calls and personal meetings) cemented my lifetime goal to continue to learn, and reflect, but more than that, to heal myself and others through both story-telling and writing.

In this essay, I focus on the healing aspects of writing, and of sharing one's expressive arts. Pennebaker and others have documented in their research that writing experiences do relieve stress and decrease medical ailments. [3-6] Physicians are not often taught to pay attention to or engage in self-healing. If emotions remain pent-up or suppressed, unhealthy coping strategies are adopted. [7, 8] These strategies interfere with a physician's capacity to be emotionally present and available to her patients, as well as to herself and her family. I believe that a physicians' personal expression is necessary for professional development. Emotional catharsis, which is often denied to students and practitioners, is underrated in a very emotionally charged profession. Medicine is a profession requiring self poise and emotional presence to the pain of one's patients, those whom we serve. Yet, most physicians can recall at least one episode of finding a fellow physician, head in his/her hands, crying over the loss of a patient, or, at the news of a terminal diagnosis in a favorite patient, quietly mourning at a desk, quickly hiding tears, fearing that a nurse or other physician might observe the display of emotion. Others can

relay stories of tired residents, hiding in a closet or bathroom, sobbing at their own limitations and exhaustion, unable to help others as they hoped. We don't hear these stories often enough, yet when asked in a safe, neutral space, most physicians have at least one such moment to share.

Based on my 20 years' experience working with medical students, residents, and clinical colleagues, I conclude there is a great need to create avenues to share these difficult experiences with others, through stories, poetry or other arts. Through creative expression, a community of sharing offers both young and older practitioners a space for catharsis and healing. The growing body of literature written by physician-authors and physician-poets, as well as the expanding number of medical journals with a section devoted to physician creative writing, provide evidence of physicians' need to achieve emotional relief through writing. The creativity and presence required to be both a good physician and author are similar, [9] and hence, not surprisingly, are also effective in promoting skills of professionalism.

I did not write during residency, but learned the skill later in life. I recognized that reflective writing helped me understand the difficult journey of caring for patients, loving them, while also loving myself, in the ever difficult challenge of balancing feelings and time in medicine. Ten years after I wrote "When A Heart Stops," I faced a very personal challenge, an unexpected separation leading to divorce, in the aftermath of the nation's shocking experience with September 11, 2001. When it seemed other families were joining, mine was splitting apart. I was finishing a research fellowship, had no real job in June of 2002, but did have a 7 year old daughter and 4 year old son to care for. It was the greatest trauma I had ever experienced. I offer now to the reader a snippet

of my own struggles with a sad divorce, and the consequent pain that were cathartically managed by writing poetry. Just as the lives of others who experience loss are paused, awaiting transformation to a newer existence, my life also transformed after divorce, when my kids were young and my job transitions made life even more unstable. When pain predominated, the pen was able to heal.

Initially, after realizing divorce was imminent, I was struck with grief, loss, and feelings of guilt about the effects of the impending dissolution of our marriage on my children, and even more over the loss of their mother's capacity to be present for them, caught as I was in the whirlwind of my own emotions.

Into the Dark

For Daniel, and Liana

Into the dark,
A veil wraps around my eyes,
 gray wisps of dust envelope me,
 an eerie moon dances by
The veil of conceit and lies
Leaves my heart trapped in a sac,
 buried within a mudslide,
 pummeling toward a cave.

Gentle words,
 “Mommy, I miss you so, it is
 sooo hard when you are away on a trip”
Warm, loving, tenderness shining in a tight cocoon,
 filling my heart,
 this shining, glowing warm star,
 pierces the cave,
 and is locked within,
 infusing warmth into the cold shredded tatters.

Tears flow...again....and again.
 Sobs, heaved in deep pain.
 Gasping thick, unbreathable air.
 Coughing.
 Finding one breath, reaching inside.
 Alas, a sigh escapes.

From outside the cave, a single ray of light shines.
 The stone roof, the weight of repression,
 barely shifts an inch.
 Moves ever so slightly,

allowing one sunray to penetrate the veil,
Squinting,
Rays of light encourage shimmering specks of dust to dance,
and reach down...down, into the cave.
Light touches the true soul—
The good soul—
The loving soul—
Reaching upward.

My son, your mommy is here.

In my next stage, I was filled with anger at the man I felt had repeatedly emotionally abandoned me. My anger seethed through the pen.

The Insidious Beast

A black eye, broken dishes, an angry threat,
Police at night, screams and jeers.
Injustice, violence, rape –
Profanities shouted in the dead of night.
Battered faces, detached inward weary eyes,
Withered souls before our sight.
And to these we outcry “abuse”!

Yet, when do we hear of the word that is not blasphemous used as a weapon?
A loved one’s concern, turned back upon her soul?
Where do we hear of manipulative put downs, accusations,
Blame for crimes not committed?

What were her crimes, for which you continued to excuse your punishments?
An attempt to engage you, offer love, express concern,
Share a thought, or fear?
These are turned into crimes against one’s soul by her perpetrator – her husband.
The man with whom she shares her bed, hopes, dreams and children.
Turned into his enemy, the invisible battle begins.

The insidious fight one does not imagine could exist.
Hope, love, desire to engage turned into means
To control her, empower him, and conceal her confusion.
Deep loneliness, the burden of blame sinks deep in her bones.
Who’s at fault? Who’s to blame?

She changes her stride, measures every word,
Muscles spasm when you, her love, enter the room.
You dictate which topics are off limits so
She could not move with ease.
Then cannot move at all.
Hoping, praying that this time, she’ll say it “right”,
Or learn not to say it all.

How many times did you avoid a conversation, divert to blame,
Accuse your victim that she made you act this way?
Your verbal assault was her fault,

Her liability, her own bidding?

The put-downs escalated - her career, her friends,
Her family, her country, her religion,
For that matter, marriage and even parenting were abominable institutions
Things encompassing her devoted heart and soul
Became targets of your slurs.
But this is the man who loves you, so you said.
She wanted to believe it so.

You told her, you were always there for her,
Yet you never reached out.
You waited, and watched.
Making her reach out to you,
Living a shared silence of your secret.

She made excuses for you.
Your unfortunate upbringing, you suffered.
But deep down you were a good man,
Believing in love, in your children and in her.
You would succeed,
Only if she could offer more love.

Finally, she could not bear your insults, your glares,
And moodiness anymore.
She called a spade a spade and you ran
To a place where you could hide
Spitting a sea of foaming insults,
Denouncing all of your love and commitment from time early on.

The truth is - you are your own enemy.
She was your victim.
Psychological rape the insidious beast.
Leaving internal scars,
Fears, tears and a sense of loss.
How will she trust again?
How can love be filled with such demons of the soul?

As with all healing, after the anger came reflection and an attempt to make sense of why things occur as they do, and to even try to find empathy for the man whom I had loved, allowing me to gently move toward forgiveness.

Sometimes...

Sometimes in love, marriage and divorce
One person expresses, as the other shuts down.

One asks, communicates, reaches out.
The other hides, clams up and runs away.
In the end, both feel.
One reaching, pulling toward the sky.

And the other saying, back off, leave me alone,
I cannot explain why.

In the end, there are questions.
One writes long letters, goes to counseling,
Cries upon friends shoulders and
Writes long poems.
The other says little to friends and family,
Avoids counseling or further expression, and
Certainly shares nothing with the ex-partner.

One appeals about the needs of the children.
More attempts to understand, fix, come together
Even in divorce, just for the sake of the kids.
The other, only says ‘The kids will be fine’, and then
Refuses to respond to any other concerns
Regarding the kids emotional or physical needs.
Choosing silence (as a weapon, or a partner).

Both feel hurt. One describes the pain.
The other simply says, ‘Everything you feel,
I do too’ and then
Walks away.

As mending transitions progressed, my pen reflected attempts and desire to re-orient toward a new life. I focused on reclaiming self and moving forward toward a place of celebrating uniqueness, both outside of, and within the loss.

Fall

A gust of wind sends leaves soaring,
Swirling circumferentially riding the torrents,
Waves in the sky.
Up, down, around and up again.
The woman in the middle of the forest laughs, then cries.

A red leaf whisks past her nose in the updraft
Her child is born, joy, beauty and miracle float past her fingertips.
Twirling hair whilst milk is blissfully imbibed,
Seeking miracles in eyes and love in brightly polished nails.
The garden grows as children delight in hide and seek between pillars of corn,
Handfuls of beans and pocketed ladybugs.

A yellow leaf swirls past her breast, drifts behind her back
And rides up to the sky.
She is standing under the huppah staring into her beloved’s eyes,
Radiating myriads of loving cheers.
Water splashes her thighs as
She relishes his love in the sand.
Promises, hopes and dreams.

Orange leaves dance in a ballet before her eyes.

Grandfather's tears of joy and sorrow around a table of tradition.
Mother's admonitions and father's advice sing out.
Grandmother's wet, large eyes magnified by glass
Mirror dreams, and truths, of pain and love.
Friends stand upon the mountaintop,
Wine, waterfalls, reeds, and song.
Laughter mounts, and the years go by.

Brown tattered leaves flurry down, spinning upon earth's axle,
Holes in their spirit they touch the ground.
The wind sears her bones.
Shivering, she hears words decrying love, vilifying her soul,
Slanders in the night. Tears on her sacred bed.
The children weep, as her husband falsely accuses.

The wind picks up speed, cold pierces
Leaves in a symphony, a storm.
Moments twirl and strike crescendo forte,
Gently, she is blanketed as andante commences
Fallen leaves woven in a warm quilt.
She rests, held together tightly by life's snapshots
And awaits spring.

Finally, it was time to move forward, with enough healing to allow a new life to unfold, incorporating joy again, with the wisdom that comes from suffering and change.

Love is....

You ask me, what is love?
There are many loves my dears.
One can say, as your grandmother often did,
give your love generously and it will return to you in
unexpected ways, such that you will be
truly blessed.

I tell you now, my daughter and my son:

*Love is the yellow of the daffodil reaching
its face to the sun. Lifting to heaven
to be bathed in the warmth.
Occasionally drooping in the
shade of a big tree,
dancing in the wind
ready to cycle once again.*

*Love is the rhythm of the oceans,
at times fierce and rocky filled
with fury, passion and then reversing
to kindly rock your limbs,
gently soothing your
breast, belly and soul.*

Love is the fruit of the apple tree,

*built upon nourishment wrought with labor.
Nutrients balanced with patient elements procuring
the sweetest gift. In years when the
balance has gone awry, bitter-mottled fruit demand
closer attention in the new year.*

*Love is yours. It is within you.
Wrap your arms around yourself,
hold your love dearly, close to your heart.
And through your eyes, and hands,
share it and find it in others.
The love you find in others, is merely
a reflection of your love, mirrored back to you
and your love is a reflection of theirs.*

When another's love turns away,
remember my dears, they added to your reservoir,
never taking away. Your love is yours.
Carry it lightly, shelter it well,
and it will grow wings, spread spaciously,
lift up with the winds, and
soar with the eagles above.

Thus, as with all other humans, when faced with transformation, pain, and loss, I journeyed through many classic stages: grief, anger, reflection and acceptance (sometimes even forgiveness). Writing feelings through poetry enhanced my ability for reclaiming self and embracing life. Although Kubler-Ross discusses stages in relation to death and dying [10], many kinds of loss often have similar psychological effects: i.e., the first poem shows isolation; the second anger; and the third shows bargaining with my own feelings, understanding other as well as self. The fourth and fifth poems are characterized by depression and then acceptance. Reflecting back through what I wrote, I can see the stages now, but during the moments of angst, I was just living it and expressing its raw nature.

I offer these pieces of my personal journey as I believe them to be typical of similar stages for all life-changing events, including illness and transformation from pre-med to physician – wherever loss of the old self occurs, with anger at limitations and

exhaustion, as well as reflective acceptance and willingness to embrace the growth that comes with one's new roles, one's new self. Although the example shared above is not my medical transformation, there are other accounts showing student growth through writings in journal and books. [11-13] The ability to own one's emotions and stay in touch with one's personal transformation is necessary to heal the physician's ability to relate to her patients. Without friends to hear my stories, and without my pen to write my hardest feelings in poems, I could not have been emotionally available to patients, which is required in my work.

If one can stay connected with one's emotions as painful events occur, then the process of writing for transformation will aid in moving toward healthy emotions for the self. In turn, this self-healing will direct physicians toward becoming sufficiently centered emotionally to relate to patients, by empowering them to accept their own limits, embrace sorrows and ultimately celebrate the joys inherent in medicine. If the process of socialization as transformation is ignored, unskilled coping mechanisms are often learned instead.[14, 15] Physicians, who are taught it is professional to distance from their emotions rather than embrace empathy for patients, may learn the art of detachment instead, unless they are encouraged to pursue self-expression and healing.

The gift of writing was fortuitously given to me. Because of its healing influence on my life, I now have the privilege of seeing the joys and blessings as well as the challenges of being a physician. After using my poetry to heal through the divorce, I've been able to open my eye to the blessings in my life and write positively about those people and places I love. In conclusion, I offer a celebration through the following poem of some of the wonderful patients I have cared for who have passed on.

A TAPESTRY OF PATIENTS' DREAMS: A Physician's Delight

You were seventeen filled with courage.
Eyes sparkled in trepidation, hormones raged.
Bicycling across the nation despite blood coughed up again,
Gasping for air, you laughed and said let me fly.
Strength in your barrel shaped chest.
Delicate, hard working hands with puffed up fingertips
Could not stop you.
The dreams and potential were acute.
Almost completed the trip this time.
Next year, you will succeed.
The young medical student, merely 6 years older
Weeps for your youth, verve, masculinity and love of life.
Wishing you miles of journey ahead.

Chocolate, fresh vegetables and fine women.
Committed passions of life.
At 97, you grace each woman with your glimmer.
Walking through boughs of greens,
Tomatoes, carrots and kale.
Never forgetting the rich melt of chocolate upon your lips.
With a kiss, your spirit lifts in peace,
After she exists the room.

Bulbs of life. Bulbs of hope. Bulbs of glory.
These you spread with joy.
Two twin red-headed girls run through the dahlias.
Grandma reads, laughs and sings.
Your son, committed and proud, makes
One more visit to your doctor.
With gratitude he honors your flowering love.
Through years of nurture, they bloomed.
Rainbow of colors tenderly guided.
Bulbs dispersed in earth and heaven.

A dancer. Lithe and graceful.
Beautiful vision and love of his life.
Swirling, dancing, making love.
Journey in souls.
Severe rheumatoid arthritis
Renders withered unrecognizable curled form
Caught between sheets.
Contracted to half your size.
The dancing is gone.
Except in his eyes. You curtsy and bow.
The music plays as you dance a dream.

Born an angel. Small, blonde perfect being.
Loved youngest and only son.
You slept on a mattress unsecured.
A single moment shattered all.
One doze behind the wheel.
Thrown from your place of rest,
In your father's arm, your spirit returned to the heavens.

Compressions, oxygen, fluid were useless
To pasty, white, petrified skin.
Fishing, catching a ball, your first kiss, teasing laughter
Left to your loved ones souls

Eyes glisten, magnified orbs sparkle.
Embedded in crevices of folded skin.
Spunky life radiates behind ragged clothes.
You laugh, and reach in your bag.
A yellow plastic duck.
An original from the one dollar store.
Just like the real ones used in the city race.
Down by the river.
Lucky children celebrate.
She shuffles away and smiles.

Quilted magical stories.
Dreams and pulse of life.
Shape the physician's treasure chest.

I have learned from my own experience how important it is to keep physicians in training in touch with their personhood and humanity! In essence, first heal the healer, so they, in turn, can heal others.

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